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Nurturing Hearts and Minds Integrating Love-Based Curriculum in Islamic Moral Education at MTs As'adiyah Putri Pusat Sengkang, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the integration of love-based curriculum approaches in teaching Akidah Akhlak (Islamic creed and morality) at MTs Puteri As'adiyah Pusat Sengkang, Indonesia. The love-based curriculum emphasizes compassion, empathy, spiritual connection, and moral character development as foundational elements of Islamic education. Through qualitative case study methodology involving classroom observations, teacher interviews, and document analysis, this research examines how educators implement love-centered pedagogies to foster students' spiritual growth, ethical consciousness, and emotional intelligence. Findings reveal that the integration of love-based approaches transforms traditional Islamic education by emphasizing relational dimensions of faith, promoting student engagement through affective connections, and developing holistic moral character. Teachers employ various strategies including storytelling, reflective practices, community service, and dialogical teaching methods that center love as both content and pedagogy. However, challenges emerge regarding assessment practices, balancing cognitive and affective learning objectives, and sustaining authentic implementation amid standardized curriculum pressures.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic education in contemporary Indonesia faces the dual challenge of maintaining religious authenticity while addressing the holistic developmental needs of students navigating complex modern realities. Traditional approaches to teaching Akidah Akhlak have often emphasized cognitive knowledge of Islamic beliefs and moral principles, sometimes at the expense of emotional engagement and spiritual internalization. The concept of love-based curriculum offers a transformative framework that positions love, compassion, and spiritual connection as central organizing principles for Islamic education. This pedagogical approach recognizes that authentic faith development requires not merely intellectual comprehension of religious doctrines but profound affective engagement that transforms hearts and shapes character. Understanding how Islamic educational institutions implement love-based curricula provides valuable insights into contemporary efforts to revitalize religious education and make it more responsive to students' spiritual, emotional, and moral development needs.

The theoretical foundations of love-based education can be traced to various educational philosophies that emphasize the affective dimensions of learning and the relational nature of educational encounters. Noddings (2013) developed an ethics of care framework that positions caring relationships as foundational to educational practice, arguing that schools should prioritize the development of caring, loving, and competent individuals. This perspective challenges purely cognitive approaches to education, asserting that moral development emerges primarily through caring relationships and experiences rather than through abstract moral instruction. Within Islamic educational contexts, this resonates deeply with prophetic traditions that emphasize love and mercy as defining characteristics of authentic faith. The Prophet Muhammad's pedagogical approach exemplified teaching through love, as he consistently demonstrated compassion, patience, and genuine care for his students' holistic well-being (Ramadan, 2007).

Contemporary Islamic educational scholarship has increasingly emphasized the need to recover affective and spiritual dimensions of traditional Islamic pedagogy that have sometimes been marginalized in modern institutional settings. Nasr (2010) argued that authentic Islamic education must address the heart as well as the mind, cultivating spiritual awareness and moral sensitivity alongside intellectual knowledge. This holistic vision recognizes that Islamic education aims not merely to transmit information about religious beliefs and practices but to transform individuals by awakening spiritual consciousness and cultivating virtuous character. The integration of love-based approaches in teaching Akidah Akhlak represents a practical effort to actualize this holistic vision, making abstract theological and ethical principles tangible through affective engagement and experiential learning.

The psychology of moral development provides additional theoretical support for love-based educational approaches. Hoffman (2000) demonstrated that empathy and emotional connection play crucial roles in moral development, as individuals develop moral commitments through affective responses to others' experiences and needs. This research suggests that moral education cannot rely solely on cognitive instruction about ethical principles but must engage students' emotions and cultivate empathic capacities. Within Islamic education, this aligns with the concept of *ihsan*, which refers to excellence in faith characterized by consciousness of God's presence and genuine love for what God loves. Teaching *Akidah Akhlak* through love-based approaches seeks to develop this consciousness by connecting abstract principles to students' emotional experiences and relational realities.

Character education literature has extensively documented the limitations of purely didactic approaches to moral instruction and the importance of experiential, relational, and community-based learning (Muhsyanur, 2023). Lickona (2004) emphasized that effective character education must engage students' moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, recognizing that character formation requires integration of cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Schools that successfully develop character create caring communities where virtues are modeled, practiced, and reflected upon regularly (Muhsyanur, 2025). The love-based curriculum approach aligns with these principles by creating learning environments where Islamic values are not merely taught as abstract concepts but are embodied in relationships, practiced through service, and internalized through reflection on meaningful experiences (Santalia et al., 2025).

The concept of transformative learning provides additional theoretical grounding for understanding how love-based approaches facilitate deep changes in students' perspectives and identities (Muhsyanur et al., 2021). Mezirow (1991) described transformative learning as a process through which individuals critically examine their assumptions, beliefs, and values, potentially leading to fundamental shifts in worldview and self-understanding. Within Islamic education, transformative learning occurs when students move beyond superficial knowledge of religious teachings to develop authentic faith commitments that shape their identities and guide their choices. Love-based pedagogy facilitates this transformation by creating emotionally safe spaces for questioning, reflection, and spiritual exploration, while maintaining connection to Islamic tradition and community.

Pedagogical approaches in Islamic education have been significantly influenced by classical Islamic educational traditions that emphasized holistic development and the teacher-student relationship (Muhsyanur, 2024). Classical Islamic education, as practiced in traditional madrasas and characterized by direct transmission from teachers to students, emphasized not only content knowledge but also *adab* or proper comportment, spiritual discipline, and moral character (Berkey, 2014). Teachers were expected to embody the knowledge they taught and to cultivate genuine care for their students' spiritual and moral development.

Contemporary efforts to integrate love-based curricula can be understood as attempts to recover and adapt these traditional emphases for modern institutional contexts, where standardization and efficiency pressures sometimes undermine the relational and spiritual dimensions of Islamic education.

The contextualization of Islamic education within Indonesian cultural settings adds additional layers of meaning to love-based curriculum integration. Indonesia's Islamic traditions have long been characterized by emphasis on moderate, compassionate, and culturally integrated expressions of faith, often summarized by concepts like *rahmatan lil alamin* or Islam as mercy to all creation (Feener, 2007). Educational institutions rooted in these traditions naturally gravitate toward pedagogical approaches that emphasize love, compassion, and social harmony. As'adiyah Islamic educational tradition, specifically, has historically emphasized comprehensive human development, balancing religious knowledge with practical skills, moral character, and community engagement. The implementation of love-based curriculum in teaching Akidah Akhlak at MTs Puteri As'adiyah represents a contemporary articulation of these longstanding educational values.

Assessment practices in values-based education present particular challenges, as the ultimate aims of moral and spiritual education involve transformations of character and consciousness that resist simple measurement. Lovat and Clement (2008) argued that values education requires assessment approaches that go beyond standardized testing to include qualitative evaluations of students' moral reasoning, behavioral patterns, and demonstrated virtues over time. Within Islamic education, authentic assessment of faith development and moral character requires attention to students' internal states, motivations, and spiritual growth, dimensions that cannot be captured through conventional examinations. Love-based curriculum approaches complicate these assessment challenges further, as the cultivation of love, compassion, and spiritual connection involves deeply personal processes that may manifest differently across individuals.

Teacher preparation and professional identity represent critical factors in the successful implementation of love-based curricula in Islamic education. Palmer (2017) emphasized that teaching is ultimately about making connections between the teacher's self, the students, and the subject matter, requiring teachers who know themselves deeply and can teach from authentic personal conviction. Islamic education teachers implementing love-based approaches must themselves embody the loving, compassionate qualities they seek to cultivate in students while maintaining deep knowledge of Islamic theology and ethics. This requires professional development that addresses not only pedagogical techniques but also teachers' own spiritual formation and their capacity to create caring, emotionally responsive learning environments.

The integration of contemporary pedagogical approaches with traditional Islamic educational values requires careful negotiation to maintain authenticity while responding to current students' needs and contexts. Douglass and Shaikh (2004) examined tensions between classical Islamic educational ideals and modern

institutional requirements, noting persistent challenges in creating educational environments that honor both dimensions. Love-based curriculum integration represents one approach to navigating these tensions, drawing on both prophetic educational models emphasizing love and mercy and contemporary educational research on affective learning and character development. The success of such integration depends on educators' ability to demonstrate how love-based approaches align with and actualize authentic Islamic educational purposes rather than representing foreign impositions on Islamic tradition.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study methodology to examine the integration of love-based curriculum in teaching Akidah Akhlak at MTs Puteri As'adiyah Pusat Sengkang. Case study research is particularly appropriate for exploring complex educational phenomena within their natural contexts, allowing for in-depth examination of how particular innovations are implemented and experienced by participants (Yin, 2018). Data collection occurred over one academic semester and included classroom observations of Akidah Akhlak lessons, semi-structured interviews with five teachers responsible for teaching the subject, focus group discussions with students, and analysis of curriculum documents, lesson plans, and teaching materials. Classroom observations focused on identifying pedagogical strategies that centered love and compassion, examining teacher-student interactions, and documenting how abstract theological and moral concepts were made accessible through affective engagement. The observation protocol, adapted from Creswell and Poth (2018), included detailed field notes documenting instructional activities, classroom environment, student engagement patterns, and specific instances where love-based approaches were evident in teaching practice.

Interview protocols explored teachers' understanding of love-based curriculum, their motivations for adopting these approaches, specific pedagogical strategies they employ, challenges they encounter, and their perceptions of student outcomes. Student focus groups examined learners' experiences with love-based approaches, their understanding of how love relates to Islamic faith and morality, and their perceptions of how these teaching methods affect their engagement and learning. Document analysis examined curriculum frameworks, lesson plans, and instructional materials to understand how love-based principles were formally integrated into the Akidah Akhlak curriculum structure. Data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), involving multiple readings of transcripts and field notes, open coding to identify recurring concepts and patterns, grouping codes into preliminary themes, and refining themes through constant comparison and verification against original data. Member checking procedures, whereby participants reviewed preliminary findings and provided feedback, enhanced the credibility of interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher maintained reflexive journals documenting analytical decisions, personal reactions, and emerging understandings throughout the research

process, following recommendations by Finlay (2002) for enhancing transparency and rigor in qualitative research. Ethical approval was obtained from relevant authorities, and all participants provided informed consent with assurances of confidentiality and voluntary participation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Conceptual Framework and Philosophical Foundations of Love-Based Curriculum

The implementation of love-based curriculum at MTs Puteri As'adiyah is grounded in a comprehensive philosophical framework that integrates classical Islamic educational principles with contemporary understandings of holistic human development. Teachers articulated their understanding of love-based curriculum as fundamentally rooted in the concept of *mahabbah*, or divine love, which represents both the ultimate goal of spiritual development and the means through which authentic faith is cultivated. This theological foundation positions love not merely as one virtue among many but as the animating principle that gives life and meaning to all aspects of Islamic faith and practice. Teachers consistently referenced Quranic verses and prophetic traditions emphasizing God's love for humanity and the centrality of love in the believer's relationship with the Divine, with creation, and with fellow human beings.

The conceptualization of love-based curriculum extends beyond individual spiritual development to encompass social and ethical dimensions of Islamic faith (Muhyiddin Tahir, Muhsyanur, 2024). Teachers emphasized that cultivating love for God naturally generates compassion for God's creation, making love the foundation for ethical behavior and social responsibility. This understanding resonates with classical Islamic theological traditions that view love as the highest station of spiritual development, surpassing fear-based obedience or reward-seeking motivation. One teacher explained that when students genuinely love God and recognize themselves as beloved by God, their moral behavior flows naturally from that loving relationship rather than from fear of punishment or desire for reward. This represents a significant shift from approaches that emphasize rules and consequences toward approaches that cultivate internal moral motivation rooted in loving relationships.

The philosophical framework also incorporates contemporary educational insights about the affective dimensions of learning and the importance of emotional engagement for deep understanding and lasting transformation. Teachers recognized that students living in contemporary contexts face unique challenges including social pressures, identity questions, and spiritual confusion that cannot be adequately addressed through purely cognitive instruction. Love-based approaches were understood as creating emotionally safe spaces where students could explore questions, express doubts, and develop authentic faith commitments without fear of judgment. Several teachers noted that adolescent students particularly respond to teaching that acknowledges their emotional experiences and connects abstract religious concepts to their relational realities and personal struggles.

The integration of love as both content and pedagogy distinguishes this curriculum approach from conventional character education programs. Love is not merely one value to be taught alongside others but is the lens through which all aspects of Akidah Akhlak are understood and experienced. When teaching about God's attributes, teachers emphasize divine love and mercy as foundational characteristics that illuminate all other attributes. When teaching about moral obligations, these are framed not as burdensome requirements but as expressions of loving relationship with God and opportunities to manifest divine love in the world. This comprehensive integration ensures consistency between what is taught and how it is taught, embodying the principle that the medium is itself a significant part of the message. Teachers consistently modeled loving attitudes in their interactions with students, creating classroom environments characterized by warmth, acceptance, and genuine care.

Pedagogical Strategies and Instructional Practices

Teachers at MTs Puteri As'adiyah employ diverse pedagogical strategies to implement love-based curriculum in their Akidah Akhlak instruction, with storytelling emerging as a particularly powerful approach. Teachers regularly share stories from Islamic tradition, particularly narratives about Prophet Muhammad's compassion, mercy, and loving interactions with companions, family members, and even adversaries. These stories are not presented merely as historical accounts but as models for understanding how love manifests in concrete actions and relationships. Teachers facilitate discussions connecting these narratives to students' own experiences, encouraging them to identify instances where they have shown or received similar compassion. This pedagogical approach aligns with narrative pedagogy research demonstrating that stories engage emotional and imaginative capacities while conveying moral and spiritual truths in accessible, memorable forms (Rossiter, 2002).

Reflective practices constitute another central pedagogical strategy, with teachers regularly incorporating guided reflection activities that invite students to examine their own hearts, motivations, and relationships. These reflections often begin with prompts asking students to consider their feelings toward God, their awareness of God's love for them, or their capacity to show compassion toward others. Teachers create contemplative spaces through brief silence, gentle music, or recitation of Quranic verses, allowing students to turn inward and connect with their spiritual dimensions. Following individual reflection, students often share insights in small groups or whole class discussions, creating communities of spiritual inquiry where diverse experiences and understandings are welcomed and explored. Several teachers noted that these reflective practices help students develop spiritual self-awareness and recognize the inner dimensions of faith that extend beyond outward observance.

Service learning and community engagement activities provide experiential contexts where students can practice the loving compassion they study conceptually.

The school organizes regular opportunities for students to serve elderly community members, visit orphanages, participate in environmental care projects, and support families in need. Teachers intentionally frame these activities as expressions of love for God manifested through love for God's creation, connecting service experiences to the theological and ethical principles studied in Akidah Akhlak classes. Reflection sessions following service experiences invite students to process their emotional responses, consider what they learned about themselves and others, and deepen their understanding of how love translates into action. This pedagogical approach embodies the principle that moral and spiritual development requires not merely cognitive understanding but practiced habits and embodied experiences.

Dialogical teaching methods that prioritize genuine conversation and mutual exploration over one-way knowledge transmission represent another key pedagogical strategy. Teachers described moving away from lecture-based instruction toward facilitating discussions where students' questions, doubts, and insights are genuinely welcomed and explored. This requires creating classroom cultures of trust and safety where students feel comfortable expressing uncertainty or disagreement without fear of negative judgment. Teachers consistently emphasized their role as co-learners alongside students, modeling intellectual humility and spiritual seeking rather than claiming to possess all answers. Several students noted that these dialogical approaches made them feel respected and valued, strengthening their engagement and willingness to grapple seriously with theological and ethical questions. This pedagogical stance reflects educational theories emphasizing dialogue as essential for transformative learning and authentic knowledge construction (Freire, 2000).

Outcomes, Challenges, and Implications for Islamic Education

The implementation of love-based curriculum has generated observable outcomes in students' engagement, understanding, and demonstrated behaviors, though these outcomes manifest in diverse ways across individuals. Teachers consistently reported increased student engagement in Akidah Akhlak classes compared to their previous experiences teaching through more conventional approaches. Students demonstrated greater willingness to participate in discussions, ask questions, and share personal reflections. Several teachers noted that students who had previously appeared disinterested in religious studies showed renewed engagement when lessons emphasized emotional connections and relational dimensions of faith. Student focus group participants confirmed these observations, with many describing how love-based approaches made Islamic teachings feel more relevant and personally meaningful.

Changes in students' understanding of Islamic faith and morality represented another significant outcome, with evidence suggesting movement toward more integrated, internalized comprehension. Students demonstrated ability to articulate how love connects various aspects of Islamic belief and practice, seeing coherence rather than fragmentation in religious teachings. Several students described

experiencing shifts in their motivation for religious observance, moving from compliance-based or reward-seeking orientations toward genuinely wanting to express love for God through worship and moral behavior. Teachers noted that students increasingly demonstrated empathy and compassion in peer interactions, with reduced incidents of bullying and increased instances of students supporting and caring for one another. While these qualitative changes are difficult to measure precisely, multiple data sources consistently pointed toward positive transformations in students' religious understanding and moral sensibilities.

Table 1. Observed Outcomes and Challenges of Love-Based Curriculum Implementation

Dimension	Positive Outcomes	Persistent Challenges	Recommendations
Student Engagement	Increased participation, emotional investment, meaningful questioning	Varying engagement levels across students, some prefer traditional approaches	Differentiated instruction honoring diverse learning preferences
Conceptual Understanding	Integrated comprehension of faith, seeing connections between beliefs and ethics	Difficulty articulating abstract concepts, balancing depth and accessibility	Continued use of multiple pedagogical strategies including concrete examples
Moral Behavior	Enhanced peer compassion, reduced conflict, increased service participation	Inconsistent transfer to contexts outside school, social pressures	Stronger home-school partnerships, consistent reinforcement across contexts
Spiritual Development	Expressed awareness of God's love, personal prayer experiences, spiritual questioning	Deeply personal nature resists simple observation, developmental variations	Long-term accompaniment, respecting individual spiritual journeys
Assessment Practices	Rich qualitative data from reflections and discussions, portfolio evidence	Difficulty with formal grading, tension with standardized requirements	Developing rubrics for affective learning, educating stakeholders about alternative assessment

Despite positive outcomes, significant challenges persist in implementing love-based curriculum within contemporary Islamic educational contexts. Assessment practices emerged as perhaps the most vexing challenge, as teachers struggled to

evaluate students' spiritual growth and character development through conventional grading systems. The deeply personal nature of spiritual formation resists quantification, yet institutional requirements demand documented evidence of student achievement. Teachers attempted various approaches including portfolio assessments showcasing students' reflective writing, behavioral observations documented over time, and self-assessment rubrics where students evaluated their own spiritual and moral growth. However, tensions remained between these qualitative assessment approaches and expectations for objective, comparable grades. Several teachers expressed concern that formal assessment might undermine the intrinsic motivation and authentic engagement they sought to cultivate through love-based approaches.

Balancing affective and cognitive learning objectives presented another ongoing challenge, particularly given standardized curriculum requirements emphasizing doctrinal knowledge. Teachers recognized that students needed both emotional engagement and intellectual understanding, both heart transformation and cognitive comprehension. Finding appropriate balance required careful instructional design and flexibility to adapt based on students' needs and curriculum coverage demands. Some teachers worried that emphasis on affective dimensions might leave students with insufficient theological knowledge, while others felt that cognitive requirements sometimes crowded out time for the reflective, relational activities they considered most transformative. This tension reflects broader debates in Islamic education about the relative priority of different educational aims and the challenge of pursuing holistic development within time-constrained institutional settings.

Sustaining authentic implementation amid various institutional pressures represented a third significant challenge. Teachers noted pressures to cover extensive curriculum content, prepare students for examinations, maintain classroom order with large class sizes, and demonstrate measurable outcomes to administrators and parents. Love-based approaches often required more time for discussion, reflection, and relationship-building than teachers felt they had available. Several teachers described feeling torn between their conviction about the importance of love-based pedagogy and pragmatic concerns about curriculum coverage and examination preparation. Maintaining commitment to these approaches required ongoing support from school leadership, regular opportunities for teacher collaboration and reflection, and clear communication with parents and students about the school's educational philosophy and priorities. The long-term sustainability of love-based curriculum implementation depends significantly on institutional cultures that genuinely value holistic spiritual and moral development alongside academic achievement.

CONCLUSION

The integration of love-based curriculum in teaching Akidah Akhlak at MTs Puteri As'adiyah Pusat Sengkang represents a significant innovation in

contemporary Islamic education, demonstrating how classical Islamic emphases on spiritual love and prophetic compassion can be systematically incorporated into modern educational practice. This study reveals that love-based approaches transform Islamic education by centering affective engagement, emphasizing relational dimensions of faith, and creating learning environments where students' emotional and spiritual development receive explicit attention alongside cognitive learning. Teachers employ diverse pedagogical strategies including storytelling, reflective practices, service learning, and dialogical teaching to implement these approaches, generating observable outcomes in student engagement, understanding, and moral behavior. However, persistent challenges regarding assessment practices, balancing diverse learning objectives, and sustaining implementation amid institutional pressures indicate that love-based curriculum integration requires ongoing refinement, institutional support, and broader educational community understanding. Future research should examine long-term outcomes of love-based Islamic education through longitudinal studies tracking students' faith development and moral character over extended periods. Additionally, comparative studies exploring how different Islamic educational institutions implement values-centered approaches could yield insights into contextual factors that enable or constrain such innovations. As Islamic education continues evolving to meet contemporary students' needs while maintaining authentic religious commitments, love-based curriculum offers a promising framework for creating educational experiences that truly nurture hearts and minds.

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